

# Varieties of Fundamentalist Experience

Reviewed by Sadanand Dhume



**The Reluctant Fundamentalist**  
By Mohsin Hamid

Harcourt, 192 pages, \$22.00



**The Islamist: Why I Joined Radical Islam in Britain, What I Saw Inside and Why I Left**  
By Ed Husain

Penguin Global, 304 pages, \$18.00

AS THE WAR ON TERRORISM enters its eighth year — longer now than World War II — one of its most striking aspects is the lack of consensus on exactly with whom the West is at war, and what it must do to bring the conflict to an end. At one end of popular discourse lies the veteran British Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk, who writes for the left-leaning *Independent*. He contends that turmoil among Muslims can essentially be traced to “political injustice in various parts of the world.” The unintentionally amusing apotheosis of this view was probably reached two months after the September 11, 2001 attacks when Fisk, his car stalled near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, came under attack from a stone-throwing, and presumably pro-Taliban, mob. His glasses broken, blood trickling down his forehead, he remained nothing if not consistent. He could not, he later wrote, “blame them for what they were doing.” After all, “[their] brutality was entirely the product of others.”

Contrast this with the historian Victor Davis Hanson of the conservative Hoover Institution at Stanford University. No talk of economic root causes or neocolonialism for him. Instead, Hanson contends that “Islamic fascism” is a “foul apparition that has succeeded fascism, Nazism, and communism as the world’s next

bane.” According to Hanson, Islamists — those Muslims who seek to order the state and society according to sharia law — are implacable foes of Western values. They subscribe to an ideology that supports polygamy, gender apartheid, religious intolerance, hatred of homosexuals, and patriarchy. “Terrorism is not the last desperate resort of this enemy; it is its first, deliberate attack.”

Between these poles jostle and joust assorted pundits, policy wonks, academics, journalists and bloggers. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid’s slender, captivating second novel, is a welcome addition to the debate.

The setting involves an encounter in a Lahore teashop between Changez — the sub-continental version of the name Genghis — the protagonist and narrator, and an unnamed American, a taciturn, barrel-chested secret agent with a wary manner and a telltale bulge in his jacket. Here, as afternoon turns to evening and evening bleeds into the menace of night, the young Pakistani unfolds his tale.

Changez belongs to an old Lahore family, rich in status — with an ancestral home on a one acre lot in leafy Gulberg and membership at the Punjab Club — but relatively cash poor. As an undergraduate he arrives in America, armed with a scholarship to Princeton, and begins an almost effortless climb up the rungs of the meritocracy. He enters his senior year without having encountered a B in the classroom, and earns a place on the varsity soccer team as well. His path, it seems, is sprinkled with fairy dust. As he recalls to the American, “Princeton inspired in me the feeling that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible.”

Upon graduating, the young overachiever snags a job with an impossibly selective Manhattan consulting firm. Here too he is im-

mediately marked for bigger things, singled out as the best of his small cohort. His love life takes a similar trajectory as he successfully courts a lissome Princeton classmate, a blonde who belongs, as he delicately puts it, “more to the camp of Paltrow than to that of Spears.” Erica is an aspiring novelist who lives with her parents in a penthouse on the Upper East Side. She becomes the young immigrant’s entrée to society.

But then comes 9/11 and things, as they say, begin to go south. On an assignment in Manila, Changez finds himself smiling as he watches the Twin Towers collapse on television, pleased, despite all that the country has given him, that “someone had so visibly brought America to her knees.” Not long afterwards, Muslim militants attack India’s parliament. On a visit home amid preparations for war with India, and with war already raging in Afghanistan, something dormant in Changez stirs. He discovers that he has always resented America’s conduct, its interference in other countries. By the time he returns to New York he has grown a beard. He can’t bear to watch news reports from Afghanistan: the mismatch between the two sides reminds him of *Terminator* with the machines cast as heroes. Meanwhile, the emotionally fragile Erica withdraws from him and begins mentally to unravel.

Eventually Changez quits his job and returns home to become a university lecturer and anti-American activist of some stature. Some of his associates have a reputation for violence and as the novel draws to a close the reader is unsure whether the American in the teashop will make it back to his hotel.

In the character of Changez, Hamid has brought to life the kind of three-dimensional figure impossible to find in a think tank report or, for that matter, in a newspaper. Indeed, the narrator, and one imagines the author, appears to enjoy debunking what he assumes are

the American's erroneous assumptions about Pakistan. His countrymen from the Northwest Frontier can be as light-skinned as Americans, he points out. Girls in paint-flecked jeans from Lahore's National College of Art need not worry about harassment by long-beards; they can always appeal to the brotherly instincts of the mob. The illegality of alcohol in Pakistan has roughly the same effect as that of marijuana in America. (Changez's Christian bootlegger delivers it in a Suzuki pickup.)

Pakistan was carved out of British India in 1947 as a homeland for those Muslims who felt they could not live in a Hindu-majority, albeit constitutionally secular, country. Nonetheless, in many ways Changez would be the same person if he carried a blue Indian passport rather than one in Pakistan's green. He has the sub-continental striver's finely tuned nose for social status. The sexes are less segregated in India than in Pakistan, and matters of dress more liberal; but an Indian could easily be as acutely aware of a girl's bare legs an inch from his hands, as is Changez when, on holiday in Greece, he shares a bus seat with a not yet romantically receptive Erica. Equally familiar would be his conception of romance — how he flirts with Erica by writing his name in Urdu below hers, or the swiftness with which dating spurs daydreams of being happy ever after.

Yet there are also aspects of Changez's mental make-up that make most sense in the context of Pakistan, the world's first country explicitly created on the basis of Islam, and one whose symbols, from the name of the capital city to the color of the cricket team's uniform, draw almost exclusively on the faith. In Greece, on the fortified island of Rhodes, he is instinctively aware of having grown up "on the other side." (The Muslim world begins in Turkey.) Similarly, he thinks of his hometown, Lahore, as "the last major city in

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a contiguous swath of Muslim lands stretching West as far as Morocco.” Changez is far from pious; at Erica’s for dinner, he accepts a glass of red wine from her father with alacrity. Yet his view of the world — his conception of history, geography and geopolitics — is unmistakably Islamic.

There’s also the curious blindness to how his country may appear to others, though this is shared by hyper-nationalists everywhere. He sees India’s military build-up after the assault on its parliament as an act of belligerence rather than as a normal — and in the final analysis restrained — response to a grave provocation. He resents America for not threatening to attack India in Pakistan’s defense. He is outraged by Washington’s pressure on Islamabad to alter its foreign policy, but he doesn’t reflect on the content of that policy, its support for attacks on civilians in India and the barbarism of the Taliban in Afghanistan.



Ed Husain is Britain’s best known renegade from Islamism. In *The Islamist* he recalls his journey from London’s Bangladeshi ghetto to the front-lines of Muslim student activism in Britain, and his eventual rejection of Islamism in favor of an interpretation of his faith that is personal rather than political. A line in the preface sums up the scale of this transformation: “The person I now am finds it difficult to recognize the person I once was.” The name Ed itself is a contraction of Mohamed.

Husain grew up and came of age in a milieu that could not be farther removed from that of the fictional Changez. The son of a restaurateur, short-sighted and unathletic, as a boy he is enrolled in the Dickensian sounding Stepney Green, at the time (the early 1980s) dubbed by the tabloids as the worst school in Britain. Husain’s family is deeply religious; his father follows a Bangladeshi *pir*, or Muslim holy man, who visits England every now and then. Taken

under the *pir*’s wing — he calls him grandpa — Husain becomes something of a “Muslim choirboy,” called upon to recite Koranic verses in mosques from Brighton to Birmingham.

In 1992, at the age of sixteen, Husain begins his love affair with Islamism. First he joins the Young Muslim Organisation, which is affiliated with the Indian subcontinent’s premier Islamist group, the Jamaat-e-Islami, founded in 1941 by Abul Ala Maududi (1903-79). Along with the Egyptians Sayyid Qutb and Hassan al-Banna of the Muslim Brotherhood, Maududi is one of the principal theorists of modern Sunni Islamism. (Their contemporary, Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini, developed a successful Shia variant.) The YMO gives Husain pride and a sense of purpose. He is told, for instance, that Muslims in Medina, not the English or Americans, invented democracy. As a young member, he must fill out a daily routine sheet to account for his time.

The YMO also takes Husain away from the Islam of his father; Maududi’s acolytes, practical and worldly, have no time for holy men with their amulets and endless chanting. He begins to pray at the East London mosque, dominated by Jamaatis, as they are known in the subcontinent, and funded partly by the Saudi Arabian government’s missionary arm, the Muslim World League. Worshipers at the mosque look down on their country cousins at the Brick Lane mosque of Husain’s childhood. At Brick Lane the men don skull caps; in East London they pray bareheaded. The Islamist-friendly mosque is also somewhat more inclusive of women. Brick Lane bars them entirely; in East London they may pray, albeit separately, behind curtains on the top floor. Fired by a new zeal, before long Husain and his friends are putting up posters in school, organizing public prayers, and pressuring Muslim girls to separate themselves from non-Muslims by donning the *hijab*, or headscarf.

The Jamaat-e-Islami furnishes Husain with the rudiments of Islamism: the conviction that Islam is a complete system of life, and that the faith makes no distinction between religion and politics. It concerns itself not merely with prayer, fasting, charity and the *haj* pilgrimage, but equally with electing representatives, running a state, negotiating treaties and regulating commerce. Islam is the source of all knowledge. True Muslims, according to Maududi, have every desire, thought and opinion shaped by the faith. Husain also reads Sayyid Qutb's *Milestones*, the Communist Manifesto of Islamism, and embraces the Muslim Brotherhood's sweeping credo: "Islam is the solution." The Egyptian argued that it is in the nature of the faith that it must dominate wherever it spreads. Before long Husain's mental map of the world is divided between *Dar al-Islam*, the House of Islam, and *Dar al-Harb* — the House of War. Between Islam and *kufr* (disbelief), he begins to feel, there must always be conflict.

Toward the end of his time in high school Husain becomes involved with another international Islamist group, Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation). Whereas the Jamaat — like the Muslim Brotherhood and many of its offshoots — is willing to use democratic means to pursue Islamist ends, the Hizb rejects democracy for placing man's law above God's law. It hopes to unite all the world's Muslims in a recreated caliphate governed by *sharia*. The preferred method to achieve this is to infiltrate Muslim armies and seize power via carefully planned coup d'états. The Hizb also promises to nationalize the oil wealth of Muslim lands for the benefit of the *ummah*, the worldwide community of believers. At the time Husain signed up, the group's leader in Britain was Omar Bakri Muhammad, a Syrian cleric later accused by the press of being al Qaeda's political representative in Britain. The Syrian, along with the Afghanwar veteran Abu Hamza al-Masri, popularly known as Captain Hook, and the Jordanian Abu Qatada, would come to embody the freewheeling welcome to violent Islamists that earned London the nickname Londonistan.

By the time Husain enrolls in university — Newham College in London — a pattern has been established. His life revolves around a tightly woven axis of prayer and activism. He has also imbibed a deep-rooted anti-Semitism. A typical Hizb ut-Tahrir leaflet declares that the only meeting place between a Muslim and a Jew is the battlefield. At times this preoccupation with Jews can be unintentionally comic. When few people show up for an ambitious Hizb ut-Tahrir conference in Wembley stadium the group blames Jews for secretly buying all the tickets. The animosity extends, albeit less obsessively, to other non-Muslims as well. At Newham, Husain and his cohort seek to strengthen Muslim solidarity by picking fights with Hindu and Sikh students.

After a while, though, Husain begins to sour on the Hizb. An acquaintance murders a Nigerian Christian student and the police pay Husain's home a visit. Even so, he isn't quite done with his grand tour of British Islamism; his next stop is the Islamic Society of Britain, a group with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. On Wednesdays he attends an *usrah* (family) group, summed up, in a rare reach for levity, as [an evening of] "Koran recitation, religious discussion, anti-Semitism and good food." Compared to the Hizb, the ISB is moderate. It does not call for a reconstituted caliphate, and its members are "British Muslims" rather than merely "Muslims living in Britain." Nonetheless some things remain constant. Though Husain has begun to privately question his hatred of Jews, Americans and homosexuals, as well as his support for the subordination of women, he keeps these views to himself. In the ISB's milieu such attitudes are taken for granted.

Over time, however, Husain begins to tire of the relentlessly political character of Islamism. He finds a job — first at HSBC and then as a clerk in local government — gets married, and begins to seriously explore Sufism. Like his father, he is drawn to charismatic preachers in this tradition, though in Husain's case, oddly enough, they tend to be American converts. Contrasting stints teaching English for the British Council in secular but spiritual Damascus and devoutly

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Islamist Saudi Arabia (where the Koran is the constitution) deepen his disillusionment with a governance-minded God. Instead he seeks (and finds) an Islam that values knowledge and spiritual growth, accepts religious diversity, and is marked by joy, compassion and fairness. Whereas once he felt moved only by Muslim suffering — in Bosnia, Chechnya or Kashmir — he now concerns himself with human suffering, observing, for instance, that each day 6000 people die of AIDS in Africa. God, he has by now concluded, is “beyond gender,” and “a human construct, a human projection.”

As a piece of writing, *The Islamist* lacks the subtlety or flair of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. At times the book reads a little like agitprop; nearly every anecdote serves a political purpose. And though by the end of his journey Husain has arrived at a new way of seeing the world, he appears to achieve this simply by replacing one set of certainties with another. The book’s message can be summed up neatly: Islamism is a distortion of traditional Islam. And though only a small minority of Islamists are terrorists, the ideology fosters a culture of grievance and condones violence to a degree that makes terrorism not only possible but likely.

Despite its stylistic shortcomings, *The Islamist* is an important book. It gives the reader a rare worm’s eye view of the global Islamist movement and searing insights into how its adherents think. It makes clear the ideology’s enormous appeal to young immigrants severed from

their parents’ traditions, their need for an Islam that is not merely concerned with the spiritual but is indeed a complete way of life. It underscores the continued influence of the militant theorists Maududi and Qutb over Muslim political discourse. Husain was hardly born to privilege, and as a youth he was inflamed by images of Muslim suffering in Bosnia. Nonetheless, he blames what he sees as the failure of the War on Terror neither on poverty nor on Western foreign policy, but on an innate inability to understand the Islamist psyche.



Of course, there are good reasons for Islamism being so poorly understood or, rather, understood in such starkly different ways. For instance, the young men who gather in Muslim Brotherhood cells are political activists; but they are also devout Muslims who see themselves as closer to the spirit of their faith than the traditionalists extolled by Husain. Islamists nurture a sense of victimization; but they are also triumphalists who boast of reclaiming every inch of land that was ever ruled by Muslims, and are convinced that their eventual victory is foreordained. By modern measures Islamists do indeed fail the test of gender equity; but in their acceptance of women in the classroom, the workplace and the mosque Islamists are often more comfortable with modernity than their traditionalist cousins. Or take the *hijab*, a vexed question in countries as varied as France, Turkey and Singapore. As a political symbol it makes a powerful statement; Islamists use it both to create a sense of separateness from non-Muslims and to “Islamize” public spaces. But the *hijab* can also signify nothing more than an innocuous expression of personal piety.

The contrast between the fictional (but plausible) Changez and Husain mimics the debate between liberals and conservatives in the West. Changez, broadly speaking, emerges from a liberal worldview. He is virulently anti-American but hardly, on the evidence, a terrorist or even an Islamist. His primary grouse is with America’s foreign policy, not with its alleged moral laxity or

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its emphasis on individual rights over collective responsibilities. He objects as much, if less passionately, to American involvement in Korea and Vietnam as to the invasion of Afghanistan. And though Changez can hardly be called poor, he does belong to a poor country. Success in America puts him at odds with his origins, and creates psychological stresses and strains different from those faced by, say, a similarly uprooted Scotsman or Japanese. Conspicuous by its absence is any discussion of the role, if any, Islam or Islamism play in shaping the young man's outlook.

Until he sees the light, Husain, of course, is the textbook Islamist. He too loathes American foreign policy, but the roots of his rage are fertilized by Qutb and Maududi rather than by Noam Chomsky or Michael Moore. Husain's experience underscores the by now familiar comparison of the War on Terror with the Cold War. Like communists, Husain and his friends value the group over the individual, justify the use of violence for political ends, and nurture an almost visceral antipathy to a world order dominated by wealthy liberal democracies. Moreover, in this new Cold War Moscow and Beijing can easily be swapped with Riyadh and Tehran, Marx and Lenin with Qutb and Maududi, and the Soviet's World Federation of Democratic Youth with the Saudi-funded World Assembly of Muslim Youth. The threat within — once symbolized by Western communist parties and their sympathizers — is now represented by such Islamist-friendly groups as the Muslim Council of Britain and the Council on American-Islamic Relations. Moreover, whereas commu-

nist and capitalist proxies skirmished in such remote corners as Angola and Afghanistan, Husain's former comrades have brought their battle to the heart of the West. For the first time, London, New York and Madrid are as much battlegrounds as Beirut and Baghdad.

From an Asian vantage point, however, neither the right nor the left quite gets it. Conservatives rightly emphasize the power of Islamism as an idea and the global ambitions of its adherents. But they often fail to acknowledge the movement's lack of military and intellectual heft, or its limited worldwide appeal compared to communism in its heyday. Liberals correctly point out that talk of an Islamist takeover of the West is delusional, or at the very least premature. But they fail to see that in the Muslim-majority societies of Asia and the Middle East Islamism remains a powerful and growing force.

The palpable backwardness of the Muslim world works to Islamism's advantage. In its prime, the Soviet Union matched the United States in such varied fields as chess, ballet, mathematics, Olympic sports, aviation technology and space exploration. Strip away the accident of oil wealth from Muslim lands and you are left with societies that cumulatively boast fewer achievements than a single mid-sized Asian power (albeit an exceptional one) such as Korea. This makes it easy to dismiss the Islamist threat, as do most Western liberals, or to shrink its dimensions to the activities of a handful of terrorist groups — al Qaeda or Southeast Asia's Jemaah Islamiyah.

Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely the sorry state of Muslim societies that makes Islamism

such a formidable force. Reminded daily that they are recipients of God's final revelation, a large minority of Muslims — perhaps between 10 and 15 percent — embrace the Islamist idea that the cause of their backwardness lies not in a failure to embrace modernity but in a failure to fully embrace their faith. Many more, while not Islamists themselves, are broadly sympathetic to a worldview that is steeped in conspiracy theories and compulsively blames Muslim failures on others.

Of course, neither religious obscurantism nor a lack of self-criticism is a Muslim monopoly. India has its Hindu fundamentalists who attack painters and scholars, America its Christians waging war against Darwin in the classroom. Nonetheless the danger to liberal democracy that Islamists pose in Muslim countries is of an entirely different order.

Islamists — though almost always a minority — tend to be better motivated and better organized than their opponents. Weak or sympathetic politicians, courts and police allow them to use violence or the threat of violence to control the public square — whether by driving the local edition of *Playboy* out of Jakarta or by shutting down open discussion of Malaysian laws that allow citizens to convert only into Islam and not out of it. Cultural norms — even in relatively open Muslim countries — put any public criticism of Islam out of bounds. Indians are free to debate the caste-centered and sexist aspects of Hindu scripture. The Spaniard who believes in contraception and gay rights can flatly declare that he doesn't care what the Bible says or what the Pope thinks. An Indonesian or Pakistani who publicly expresses similar sentiments immediately invites charges of "Islamophobia" and threats of violence. It's no coincidence that those bold Muslim thinkers who have begun to ask the kind of awkward questions that need to be asked — Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Irshad Manji and Asra Nomani to name just three — live and work in the West.

The influence Islamists exert on public discourse has had important consequences. Even where they have not claimed formal power — as in Egypt or Pakistan or Indonesia — Islamists

have led their societies in an illiberal direction. In Egypt, female university students come under greater pressure to wear the headscarf today than they did a generation ago. In parts of Pakistan, Islamists have declared war on music, advertising and soap operas. In Indonesia, Christians and heterodox Muslims such as the Ahmadiyya find their churches and mosques under siege, and their prospects in public life more constricted than they were a generation ago.

In each of these countries, those who reject the Islamist message — who believe that gender equity, freedom of speech and freedom of conscience are universal values and not merely Western ones — must do so with one hand tied behind their backs. Since public discourse has no space for atheists, agnostics and free thinkers, Islamists are able to control the moral high ground. Unless Muslims can find a way to broaden the debate in their countries, to allow purely secular and even anti-religious arguments to set up stall in the market of ideas, they will continue to lose ground to Qutb and Maududi's grim and determined heirs.

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